

High and Low Charity

by Dexter McCoy

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Summary: Complete A squad of ODSIs fight for their lives and a way to escape the massive Covenant worldship in its death throes. They search for a way to return home, and find more adventures lie in wait, abroad and at Earth.

1. No Charity

No Charity on High Charity

Somehow, they had stayed alive.

Blackman and his squad had no idea what had happened to the rest of the Marines, but the "Flood" was on the ship. Somehow, they had kept the hordes of the hellish beasts off them. They had gone to their HEV (Human Entry Vehicle) pods, after gathering some food to eat. The past few hours, they had just talked over the COM and waited.

"I'm tired of this. Where are we?" said Orique.

"Like any of us know. We're probably about to crash-land in the middle of some Covenant op. And die."

Of course, Corporal Miguel Lopez had no idea how right he was.

The In Amber Clad thundered down towards the surface. It looked like it would crash straight down into the Covenant metropolis, but in a sudden nosed up violently and rocketed over two gleaming, purple towers. In the next few seconds it had bounced off another tall structure, leaving a gaping hole and fire, and carved into a skyscraper. It continued on shakily and headlong smashed into a smooth, polished tower. Any surviving Flood waddled, scuttled and leaped out of the wreck onto the strange new world to infest.

"OK, everyone out." The squad climbed out of the pods. "Anyone hurt?" Planter's leg had a gash from the bottom of the shin to the middle of his calf. The HEV pods were pretty rickety â€" some burned up in

drops. So, some had crumpled or bent in the crash, injuring Blackman's men. Madigan had his left arm bent at a strange angle, and Orique was a mess. His pod was such a wreck, the men had to pry it open. His back was cut from one side to the other, there was a bleeding cut from his forehead to his ear and his ribs were badly broken, so he was coughing up blood. He took two short, ragged breaths and his head drooped down. Steeler checked for a pulse " it barely showed. The men worked Orique out of the pod, and laid him down. For the first time Steeler noticed Orique's skull was fractured, and since his ribs had cut his lungs and possibly his heart, it didn't look like he had much of a chance.

"What do I do, Joe?" questioned Steeler.

"Is that man alive?" answered Blackman.

"Yes, sir."

"Does he have much longer to live?"

"Well, no, I don't think so. Can we get to the medical bay? That would be helpful."

"Where is it? How do we get there safely?"

"Joe, are you asking me whether or not this man's life is worth the effort?"

"Well, realistically, can we get there without taking more casualties than we already have?"

"No, probably not. It's just, he might have a chance if -"

"Do any of us_ really_ have a chance right now?" interjected Planter.

"Alright, point taken. Still, are we just going to let this man die?" countered Steeler.

"Sitting around and talking about isn't going to change anything, guys," said Dale, one of the corporals.

"Sure, let's just walk out of here like we're going for a Sunday stroll," replied Stockholm, Lopez's PFC.

"Feeling a little acid, ya limey?"

"Did you enjoy screwing the commander last night? I heard you had quite a time."

"Shut up. Dale's right. Stockholm's right. I suppose it's up to you guys," growled Blackman, thinking, _I wonder if I'll regret this_.

"Are you men willing to risk your lives to see if we can save this man's?"

"Oh, Blackman, forget it. The poor man is dead," moaned Steeler.

What now? thought Blackman. He felt insensitive and sick when the answer came to him so quickly and obviously. He pointed at an emergency launch button on the exterior of the pod.

Steeler launched Orique in his pod down the tube. There was a muted explosion.

"At least those Flood freaks won't be able to use his body," Watson, a private in Dale's fire team, said.

"And he's probably in a better place than us right now," added Jeffrey, Lopez's only private.

Steeler turned away slowly. He morosely straightened Madigan's arm and cleaned up Planter's cut and bandaged both. "You can move that arm a little bit. Planter, stay off your leg as much as possible. The muscle is torn."

Blackman spoke up, carefully. "OK, first fire team with me on point. Dale, you cover Steeler and our patients. Lopez, you're on our six." The squad obeyed and fell in behind their Sergeant. Blackman assessed James. The corporal was young, twenty-five. Gregg looked alert, but depressed. Down on his luck, he had joined up at nineteen and hoped to earn some money for prep school after dropping out of high school his last year. Right now, it didn't seem like he'd be able to get his next paycheck. Thompson, James' PFC, was even younger at twenty. He was academic, yes, but he couldn't get a scholarship and his widow mother couldn't pay for college. Commack, the private, was just a tough guy from a working class family in Chicago. Dale and Watson were best friends out of high school. They don't know why they joined, they just did. They hadn't come up with a reason for the two years they had been in the military. The whole ODST thing was to impress the ladies back home.

Then Joe's train of thought was interrupted.

"What was that?" Stockholm piped up.

"Oh, man." Several other groans followed.

"They're back."

First, two of the balloon-like freaks skittered out from the corner. They popped into shreds of greenish-yellow flesh as the large rounds from Blackman's battle rifle tore through them.

"Fall back. We know the drill." The squad backed up quickly. Then two humanoids appeared. Their wrists snapped down as they lashed out with their deadly, whip-like tentacles. Rounds upon rounds tore through their flesh, and they fell to the ground in tatters and pieces. Green ooze leaked from the dismembered limbs. Commack's shotgun roared defiance at three more of the combatant forms of the Flood, blowing chunks out of their fleshy, gelatinous bodies. Then hundreds of more of the balloons came, and the squad fell into a full retreat. However, Planter was slowing them down and they couldn't leave him behind.

"Commack, Madigan! Get with me. We'll cover you, Planter. Everyone else run!" Blackman had also taken a shotgun from the armory before the crash, and he unslung it. Madigan had a modified MA5B, rigged to

handle large 7.62 mm rounds in hundred-round bandoliers.

"Get behind us, Planter!" The twin shotgun blasts thundered out, the machine gun making a quick, low blatting noise. Planter limped along as fast as he could. The wave of infectious balloons came closer, and closer, until the little creeps were exploding at the end of Blackman's, Madigan's and Commack's barrels. The attacking humanoids lunged forward towards the four soldiers. Their bodies were cut to pieces by the powerful shotgun blasts and white-hot bullets. In a sudden, it stopped.

All four of the men sighed out loud. They ran down the hall towards a waypoint marking the rest of the squad. They rounded a corner and there was a discreet cracking sound above them. Planter, who had fallen behind, was suddenly whipped upside-down. A yellowish tentacle held him there.

"They're going to do it to me. They're â€"â€|" Commack shot three shells into the ceiling. The plate creaked, then crashed to the floor. On it was a combat freak. Some otherworldly thing caused the men to hesitate. The freak took the opportunity to turn over and show something akin to a smile. Blackman pulled the trigger on his shotgun. There was a dull click. He closed his eyes. The three ODSs were frozen with fear. The Flood being reached for a sidearm and pointed it at Planter. Commack finally pulled the trigger on his gun â€" and Planter's head seeped blood, which mixed with the gangrenous "blood" of the Flood form that had splattered all over. Commack took his boot and ground it into what remained of the freak's face. It squelched into a pancake.

"There'll be more. Let's get off this ship before someone else dies," Blackman said.

"_Sarge, this is Steeler. We just had another close encounter. Watson's got a bullet wound in his side, there's biofoam in it, but that won't last too long. I feel so terrible, man._"

"We'll be there shortly, Steeler. I don't know what to say. I just want to get off this wreck." Joseph switched off the COM. "OK, guys, let's keep moving."

Joe returned to his previous thoughts. Lopez, well, he was Hispanic (as the saying would go). His father had been killed fighting at Sigma Octanus, so he had run away in the middle of the night to join. When he did, he had the ODSs in mind. He called his mother later on, but to no avail. She was hysterical. He stayed. He got a letter from his old _abuelo_, his grandfather. He said that Lopez was insane, but he always figured his grandson was crazy, anyway. He was proud. Stockholm was from Earth. He was from England, who said he entered the Corps to "see how revolting the food was." Jeffrey was nimble and quick. He had grown up mostly on the streets to get away from his fighting parents and abusive and controlling older brother.

Blackman, Commack and Madigan reached the rest of the squad.

"Planter's dead. Hope I'm not next," Madigan said, looking at his arm. No one responded. What was there to say?

The men moved silently through the corridors. They were making their way to the forward lifeboat airlocks, where they hoped they'd be able to get out. Lights were out occasionally. There was a dank and dark feeling about the ship. Some corridors were blasted and blackened, and there were still gory, misshapen bodies of crew members around.

"If we get out of this â€" who wants to live any more, anyway? I mean, in this world?" asked Dale.

"Sure takes guts," responded Watson, who was cringing and bending over at his middle. No one realized it was supposed to be a pun in the darkness of the situation.

"We're not getting out of this one, Dale. We're probably all going to die. No, people only make it out of these things in the movies. We're not getting out. Not human, at least." What Thompson said made a shiver go down everyone's spine.

The squad was silent for a while. What was to be said?

They reached the lifeboat airlocks. They proceeded through, and jumped down into the pearly, purple and now destroyed Covenant hallway.

"It's good to be home," quipped Stockholm. Some of the guys chuckled.

"OK, men, lock and â€"â€"|"

"Out of the frying pan, into the fire." The men all cracked up. Blackman fixed Stockholm with a gaze. "Sorry, sir. Couldn't help it."

"Jeez, sir, it was â€"â€"|" Madigan said.

"My turn, John. I don't care. Let's get our act together, men! Like our quipster said. We're in the spotlight. If you want to live, you need to be at alert at all times. There are two rules now. Listen to me, and shoot anything that isn't human. That is all."

On queue, several grunts and an elite trotted out of a nearby doorway. The elite growled orders to the squealing grunts that opened up on the ODSRs. They backed up into the airlock. The hallway was skinny and there was no way to flank the enemy. It was going to have to be a head-to-head firefight.

"Return that favor, men. Dale, Steeler, cover Madigan and Watson. Lopez, watch our rear. James, you're with me." Thus ensued the frenzied fray.

Bullets and plasma bolts were traded down the hallway. Madigan sprayed searing rounds down the hallway. Blackman took a grenade and loaded it into the launcher on his battle rifle barrel. He fired off a burst and then pitched it down the hall. It exploded at a corner and dying grunts wailed as they faded away. The rest of the squad got the idea and tossed a grenade down the hall. The explosions were consecutive and laid waste to the enemy. A few last grunts died in flames when Madigan blew open their methane tanks.

The squad continued through the door from which their assailants had come. There was a wall in front of them, which they proceeded around to find they were on the lower end of an ascending hallway.

"Bad place to be, sir. Let's get to the other side," suggested James.

They trotted to the top. They continued through the door there and found themselves in a curving hallway, so they could not see the other end. Blackman signaled for Lopez's fire team to get up on a raised side of the passage and cover the squad's flank. The hall was vacant. As they reached the end, there was an explosion. Blue fire from overhead plasma conduits spindled out across the ceiling and from it came a blazing combat form. The fiery beast launched itself towards them. Another dozen followed. In a sudden the passage was alive with the melee.

"Cover Watson! Lopez, get them now!"

"One's on me! Get it off!"

"Help!"

"Oh, freak, I can't â€"

"Get this thing off me!"

"Everyone! Fall back, break, run! Just get the crap out of here!"

"Sarge, I need help getting my team out!"

"Give Lopez some support, James! Steeler, get our wounded out of here!"

"They're gone, sir!" The remains of the squad sprinted out of the hall. That offered little respite. They got two seconds breathing time, and then the door burst in a blue explosion. They all fired their weapons as fast as they could. Soon, there was a pile of dead Flood on the floor.

One twitched. Commack shot it.

"Steeler, what's the deal?"

"Sir, Madigan and Watson are dead. Thompson is dead, and Jeffrey was infected. But we killed what he turned into. A better fate."

"I agree. Let's get away from here. We need a rest." Blackman finished.

"Sir, just how do you plan to get out of this?" asked Stockholm.

"I don't."

"They're all dead. Watson is dead. He's dead. I'm dead. I want to die. It'd be better than this. Why should I live? What's the point, now? They're dead."

The squad had moved up to a new room. Dale rambled every once and a

while. Nothing had happened yet, but something was bound to happen. The Covenant was caught up with the Flood, so they shouldn't have cared about a squad of ODSTs anyway. The problem was sanity. Dale talked to himself, and the other guys just sat around, waiting for something to happen. What next? The squad had been sitting in that room for almost a day. Food was also a problem. They had gathered the remains of food from the mess hall, but it wasn't much. Blackman could see his men were hungry. He knew the Covenant used food nipples, but he wasn't sure what kind of crap they ate. The squad's only hope would've been to hijack some Covenant space vehicle and jump out of the system. But the odds of that were a million to one. So Blackman told his men to get up. The odds were in favor. They were Helljumpers.

They proceeded out opposite the way they had come. They traveled down hall after hall, all the while purple lights flashing, and displays burning red and showing fights between Flood and Covenant soldiers. The squad got lucky, though.

"Sir! Look, I think it's a map. Or some directions. Look, there's a route outlined on it. It leads to Phantoms. We'll take one of those, link up with anyone we can findâ€¦ I don't know," said Steeler.

"Good eye. How do we remember the directions? Who has a pencil and paper? A portable pad?"

Steeler nodded and brought his out. He tapped in some commands, but the top end popped off and the screen cracked down the middle.

"OK. Each of us has one direction. At each junction, we will say our direction," instructed Blackman. He started with himself, then Steeler, and continued through to Stockholm. There were two extra. He assigned them again to himself and Steeler, so they both had two directions. They continued. They weaved their way wildly through the hallways for the first few minutes, and it seemed like they were getting nowhere. But Lopez was at his direction, so they had to be close. Logically. As they came to the next door, they heard a firefight beyond it. Blackman threw a plasma grenade he had acquired and it stuck to the door. It exploded and left a hole through which the squad could fire. Lances of bullets went through the air and hit anything they could. This was a mistake, though. The surviving Covenant was three Brutes. They detonated the door with their terrifying grenade launchers and bashed aside anything that was left.

"Send them to hell!" Blackman screamed. The squad went fully automatic. The brutes' grenades blasted back Stockholm and James. Dale launched himself forward screaming incoherently, his battle rifle blazing fire. The Brute that was under attack lashed out with the blade on the rear of his weapon. It caught Dale in the stomach, but he somehow had enough strength to stab the brute with his combat knife.

"Go to hell, freak." He primed a grenade and the three brutes were engulfed by the flames and died.

"Oh, God. Steeler, let's go," Blackman sobbed. They made it to the Phantoms, and found one last ship. The four men got in the alien craft. They flew it out. The ship shot unsuspectingly over the

Covenant home world, oblivious to the fact that Humans had just stolen it and were flying it away. They saw a grav bridge, spanning across the gap between where they had just been and connecting to a giant structure lit white. They saw something in the bridge. It was green, and stretched out. It looked vaguely familiar.

"What the hell?" Steeler said.

"Son of a bitch!" said Commack.

"A Spartan."

"What is he doing?"

"He knows. Leave it to him. Just get us out of here." The Phantom rocketed towards the white structure in the center of the "city."

"Steeler, what are you doing? That's not the way out," McCracken inquired. Just then, the structure's base lit with blue and white fire.

"That's a ship, sir, not a building."

"Go for it." The Phantom punched out into space after the giant ship, and towards the second Halo. All around them, red and blue lit the sky. The Covenant fleet was destroying itself.

"What do you suppose is going on?" asked Lopez.

"It looks like they're killing each other. Civil war," said Commack.

The Phantom flew into Halo's atmosphere.

"Sarge, last I heard, Keyes was being taken to some control room of sorts. I bet it's on here," said Steeler. Sure enough, a red flag marked a spot on a map in the ship.

"Make best speed there, Steeler."

"Then where? Where would someone go to activate the other rings?"

"Why the hell? The Ark, of course."

"And where, Oracle, is that?" asked the Arbiter.

"At Sol, of course." A map showed up, and showed the Solar System in place of the six remaining Halos.

"Come on, Tinkerbelle. Commander, it's time to get out of here," said Sergeant Johnson. The foursome walked (and floated) out of the Control Room of Delta Halo. They stood on the platform.

"Now what?" said Miranda Keyes. A Phantom appeared on the horizon. It flew closer in a hurry. Johnson leveled his sniper rifle.

"Hold your fire, Sergeant," said Keyes. The Phantom slowed as it closed in. A hatch opened and an ODST walked out, his corporal behind

him.

"Officer on the deck!" he bellowed. The two stood straight and saluted.

"Thanks for the ride, Marine. We're going to need it," said Keyes.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, we need to get out of here. Sergeant Blackman, ma'am," said Blackman.

"Soldier, we need to get to Earth," the commander said.

"And how do propose to do that?"

2. Homecoming

The Arbiter had lagged behind pondering the situation. He was now branded a heretic, and he was very much aware of the consequences of killing Tartarus and collaborating with Humans. The two remaining Hierarchs would definitely find something worse than being hung by his entrails (the Arbiter knew nothing past that Tartarus had taken the Holy Icon from him to the Prophets. By then, of course, Truth was at Sol and the Flood had consumed Mercy).

He marched out into the sunlight. A Marine he did not recognize shouted out.

"Commander! Look out!" and fired a burst in the Arbiter's direction. The bullets flared his shield. He stepped back behind what remained of the door.

"No! Stop, Blackman! Tell your men to hold their fire. He's with us," explained Keyes.

"Sorry, ma'am. Old habits die hard."

Lopez chuckled.

Keyes pointed off behind Blackman's left side. Sergeant Johnson's eyes lit up and the Arbiter's thinned to hatred. As Blackman turned and saw what she was pointing to, his heart sank.

In the distance, a Covenant vessel loomed over the tranquil seas. It gleamed a silvery violet in the sunlight, and dark clouds of birds flocked around it, casting shadows on its blunt head. The mighty beast sat sleeping. Its captain, Tartarus, was dead, and inside all was turmoil. The Covenant Civil War raged everywhere.

So Keyes decided to take advantage of it. "Alright, boys. That's our new target."

"Ma'am, with all due respect, you can't ask my men to do that. They've just fought for two days. Look it, I'm missing nine of my men. Furthermore, the four of us that are left are low on ammo, we're tired, and we're hungry."

"Now stop complaining and do what the lady tells ya, squirt. If you don't feel up to the challenge of shooting spineless freaks (the Arbiter grumbled at this), then I will gladly inform the recruiter we will be needing a replacement. Your job is to do what the Commander here tells ya."

"Sergeant Major, sir, I do not enjoy watching my men get slaughtered by three- armed, headless cadavers bubbling with puss. We want some down time."

"Hm-mm. Well you can sit your butt down and please kindly allow us to use the Phantom to do our jobs. It's all right. The Corps ain't paying us by the hour."

Blackman was upset, needless to say. He, Lopez, Commack and Steeler had come from two days of fierce warfare and here Keyes was dropping them back into it, like mice in a snake pit. Oh, Blackman was terrified. He had one life. Why did he waste it on this? What had prompted him to join the Marines and fight against this frightening enemy? Why did he have to be born at this part in human history?

Then again, maybe it was the last.

"The grunts usually work the communications equipment. Their tenacity should have kept them alive for this long. I will speak to them, Keyes," said the Arbiter, in his deep, soft voice. The Phantom was approaching the Covenant flagship, a mighty cruiser covered with streamlined bulbs humming with energy. As they came closer, the birds turned to Banshees protecting the ship from any intruders.

Unfortunately, Brutes flew them. One hailed the Phantom in the Brutes' grunting, roaring language. The Arbiter did not answer. Instead he addressed the rest of the troop.

"These Brutes need identification. Otherwise we are not allowed to enter. I will not answer â€" we need the element of surprise. Someone man the turrets."

Blackman motioned to his men but told Steeler to stay. Joe decided he wanted a piece of the action, now that they were into it.

The Banshees ducked slightly below the dropship's hull. Each one was engulfed in plasma fire, and fell smoking to the blue ocean below.

"Hold on," called the Arbiter. He thrust the accelerator forward and the Phantom rocketed full speed towards the cruiser. More Banshees swooped in; their gun ports alight with boiling, sizzling death. They scored hits on the heavy armor of the dropship, but when they dropped below it, Blackman, Commack and Lopez burned them to a crisp. Unfortunately, that would not do it. There were hundreds of Banshees and one Phantom. Blobs of plasma splashed onto the hull. The only advantage the humans and elite had was that the vulnerable area was on the bottom of the hull.

Then the ship rocked violently and the Arbiter shouted in

anger.

"What was that?" asked Keyes.

"A fuel rod shot. It just charred the circuits to the auxiliary power supply. I was about to use them so we could go faster."

The Banshees now started dropping below the ship aft of it. Then they would accelerate skyward and shoot the bottom of the ship if Blackman and his men didn't get them first. They were taking quite a lot out of the Phantom. What is on the bottom of a Phantom is mostly circuitry and the machinery for the grav lift used to deposit troops. Right above that is the deck of the interior. Also, if someone made a good enough shot, they might be able to send it through the grav lift chamber into the ship, which would severely damage the ship and its systems.

Blackman, Commack and Lopez were desperately trying to ward off the Banshees, which endlessly harried at the dropship.

"They just keep coming."

"Y'know, I was really going for a barbecue yesterday. Guess I'll take what I can get."

Blackman chuckled quickly; there wasn't time for wisecracks right now.

"Charred brute meat does not smell fair, Humans. I have slaughtered many with my sword," commented the Arbiter.

More and more fire surrounded the ship. Blackman and his men could only send so much back. The ship lurched suddenly to the right and it began to flame as power to the right engine lowered to a dangerous level. There was an explosion as a capacitor overheated. The craft's right engine sputtered out. Banshee after Banshee cruised in, melting away what was left of the fuselage. The Arbiter jerked the Phantom upwards and hit a Banshee. It reeled backwards and smashed into another. Countless more turned into a blossom of fire and death in seconds.

"We're here!" The Phantom came into the bay. The aliens inside were unsuspecting, and it docked quickly. A call for a repair crew was made.

"Now just hold on, guys. We've got to do this well," said Keyes.

The Phantom had come in quite noisily, in fact, and its starboard side was smoking and charred. One senior repairman had called for a repair crew, and the jackals and brutes looked at the exit hatch expectantly.

It finally slid open.

343, who had stayed with his human and alien companions, floated

mindlessly out of the hatch, humming some random tune. The bay crews looked on, perplexed.

"Greetings. I am 343 Guilty Spark -â€|"

The Arbiter leaped out, energy sword sparkling. The brutes were cut across the abdomen, causing their insides to spill out messily, and the Arbiter took his liberties with the rest of it. Then, Blackman, his men, Keyes, and Johnson filed out, guns spitting death. The aliens were mercilessly blown away. Screams and gurgles of pain resounded through the bay. The bay hands were mostly unarmed. A few jackals had time to pull out plasma pistols, and one brute unclipped his rifle from his belt. Nonetheless, they were cut down like so many blades of grass.

"My, what a waste of time. We must reclaim the Index and activate the Core.

"I am a genius."

"Who is that crackpot?" asked Lopez.

"This is Tinkerbelle. He goes around dumping fairy powder on you so you can fly, Marine," said Johnson. "Now shoot the gorillas we evolved from!"

"Well, it's do or die, I guess."

A bloody minute or so later, the bay was clear, and the group moved into the hallways. As they rounded a corner, a jackal screamed disapproval a fired a bolt down the corridor. Two of the raptor-like aliens sidled down towards the band of marauders. The Arbiter sprinted across to the other side of the passage, which made the jackals turn and allow Blackman and his men to tear them apart.

There was one thing Blackman was wondering: how they would know where the bridge was. He spoke up.

"Commander, how do you propose we find the bridge?" Before Keyes could answer, the Arbiter replied.

"This certain ship I have excellent knowledge of. I have commanded one before and know where we need to go to take control of it." And with the Arbiter in the lead, they traveled through hall after hall, with many firefights in the meantime. As they came close to the bridge, Johnson peeked around the corner and saw two brutes armed with brute shots and eight jackals, covering in every direction except towards the bridge.

"We got quite a large number of hostiles, ma'am," speaking to the Commander, "so I suggest we find a different route," shifting his gaze to the Arbiter. They individually crossed to the other side of the passageway. Then they looked down the consecutive entrance, with the same result. Obviously the commanders of the ship had heard of the intruders and were taking no chances with their intrusion. So how would they get in?

"At each door, there are eight hostiles, but seven of us, not including Guilty Spark here. Probably countless more inside, ma'am. How are we going to pull this off? And how many entrances are there to the bridge?" asked Blackman.

"Four," answered the Arbiter.

"If we split up and took different doors it might work. Arbiter, go on the other side. Johnson and I will take the consecutive door to you. Blackman and Lopez, then Steeler and Commack, take these two doors. Everyone, throw grenades _first_. Once we are finished, hold your position," said Miranda. Everyone understood, though the Arbiter went away with a look of frustration. Here he was, once a commander of great warships, being given commands by a human who was definitely not his senior. Had the godsâ€| but without the _salvation_ of Halo, what gods were there?

He came up to his position and waited.

But he felt shameful. First, because he was cooperating with humans. It was also because he was working against creatures he had commanded and it was a betrayal.

Keyes gave the mark and the attack began.

Then again, they had betrayed him first. He found some consolation in that as he slaughtered the jackals and wrestled with the brutes.

There was more trouble with Lopez and Blackman. As they were about to throw their grenades, Lopez sneezed. One of the brutes threw a grenade like a baseball down the hall and it bounced off the wall behind the two ODSTs. They ran, but the aliens heard the sound from their boots. Commack and Steeler had already engaged their portion of the resistance, revealing that there were, in fact, enemies to be dealt with. So the brute that had thrown the grenade, believing the two pairs of Helljumpers were the same, ordered all eight of his team down the hall to check out what was going on. Lopez and Blackman were just getting up from the blast when their adversaries rounded the corner. One of the brutes fired a grenade just over the humans' heads, and it exploded five feet behind, deafening both of them. The humans pitched a grenade each, laying waste to the jackals and leaving the brutes stunned. Both ODSTs took this opportunity to nail the brutes.

As Lopez leaned on his left arm against the wall, he felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder. Blackman also noticed a throb in his right side. They both had shrapnel wounds from the grenade.

But with their team eliminated, they flanked Steeler and Commack's enemies and ended it all the more quickly.

"_Status, people_," said Keyes.

"_I'm uninjured_," answered the Arbiter.

Blackman accounted for all of his men and informed Keyes of the shrapnel wounds.

"_Alright, men. Get ready to move on the bridge. First, though,

Arbiter, we need you to unlock the doors. Find some way to bust these doors open. We need to get inside this bridge before more Covenant get here,_" said Keyes.

"It really is simple, ma'am. Just throw down a plasma grenade and watch the fireworks," answered Blackman. He figured if they could have blown the doors on High Charity like that, they could now.

"_Well, then. Problem solved._"

There was a humming, buzzing noise as an electric blade sliced the door. It was frightening â€" the anticipation of death. There could only be one elite on this ship.

It traced a circle of molten metal, which glowed a bright, pansy red. The circle was almost complete -â€|

Three explosions resounded through the bridge, drawing attention elsewhere. The other entrances to the bridge were pried open, and gunfire came through. The Arbiter leaped out, warbling an ancient battle cry of anger.

He relieved several jackals of their heads, but then went straight for the ferocious brutes, that charged at him wildly. The first he stabbed in the head, and flung to the side. He then kicked one in the leg, breaking the bone, all the while cutting to death another. Each brute that attacked was angrily cut down in vengeance for the Arbiter's betrayed brothers. Soon the Arbiter became a confusing blur of movement as he fought for the elites dead and himself. Then the captain of the ship leaped down as the last of his brutes fell. He ripped the blade off a brute shot and threw a punch at the Arbiter, who reeled back. In return he kicked the brute in his side, crushing a rib or two. The air was blown out of him. The Arbiter ran and brought his blade down, but the brute punched him in his arm, and he roared in pain. The energy sword was flung away. The brute got back up and wrestled the Arbiter. He tried to keep the metal sword away from him. Then he twirled behind the brute, kicked out one of his legs and snatched away the sword.

He made one last slice across the brute's chest, which shouted out in pain, and tried to keep a hold on the world. The Arbiter growled this:

"Life is cruel. So is death."

And he killed the brute.

"Blackman, quickly! You and your men, cover the doors. Arbiter, I need your help. How do we move this hulk?" asked Keyes.

"Hmâ€| Last time I did this we had Cortana to fly the ship. But I guess Mr. Squid-head has it under control." The Arbiter shot a glare at Johnson.

"The AI in control of this ship fortunately has no racial

dispositions. It has direct control over all the ship's systems. I can command it to do whatever we need done," explained the Arbiter.

"Well, then. Tell it to lock down and close all blast doors leading to the bridge. Disable all the lifts. Lock down all compartments containing vital systems. That will include weapons. We don't need to be interrupted."

"It's done. Now, Commander, we need to leave this system," said the Arbiter.

"Good. Get the battlenet on the speakers. I want to know where Truth and Mercy are."

As the ship pulled out of the grip of Delta Halo, they learned Truth was on his way to Sol already and Mercy was presumed dead. All ships had been ordered to Sol, and its coordinates were broadcasted. Few made it out of the system. All the ships were blasting away, vaporizing each other in a battle for power, fame and the favor of the Prophets.

The humans and the Arbiter, along with their crazed companion, 343, slipped away in the confusion.

And so there they were. The Human fleet battled ferociously, like a frightened animal, warding off the invaders. A strange, metallic ship had entered the fight. It somewhat resembled the Eiffel Tower. It plowed through the destruction. Its goal: reach the Ark. What follows that depends on your point of view. Shortly thereafter, a sleek Covenant ship appeared. To show its allegiance, it immediately let loose a barrage of lava-fire on several other Covenant ships. Soon after, Commander Keyes' voice echoed scratchily over the strained COM net.

"This is Commander Keyes. Do not fire upon our ship. We are in pursuit of the unknown spacecraft. Any assistance is welcome."

"_Commander, Lord Hood. Where did you come from_"

"Long story, sir. We need to stop that ship! If we don't, we're all going to die. Human, Covenant, no matter. It needs to be stopped."

"_We can't spare any ships, Commander. If you can get out of whatever you were in before, you can take that thing on._"

"Sir, requesting one platoon of ODSTs in an assault boat to board my ship. It is full of hostiles. I just don't like swimming with sharks, sir."

"_I'll see what I can do. Hood out_."

The Arbiter accelerated through the Forerunner ship's wake, following it down to Earth.

Minutes later the two ships launched through the atmosphere, looking

like giant fireballs. Keyes and Johnson worked the weapons, but all they threw at the ship just dissipated as it reach the target. So they followed it. They drifted over the pristine Earth. The African plains flashed by below. Animals leaped away from the frightening monsters. Here it was. All that humanity held dear, and the Covenant already had it. It was over. Worse, what about our beliefs? Our history. We thought we had it all figured out " but then who were these Forerunners? Why were we on such an important planet? Why had the Forerunners put us here?

Who were the Forerunners?

3. Slaughter and Execution

"_Covenant cruiser, this is Kilo Alpha 624. Repeat: Kilo Alpha Sixer-Two-Four. Please lower the atmosphere shield on starboard bay_."

"Copy that, Kilo Alpha. You are clear to enter bay. Be advised: drop zone may be hot. We'll transmit bridge coordinates soon," answered Keyes. "Arbiter, tell your AI to unlock all necessary doors and activate all needed lifts on the shortest route to the bridge. We need as many of these boys as possible." The Arbiter complied and started tapping the psychedelic keys on the control panels around him.

"When do we get off our shift, Blackman? I've been guarding this door for ten hours. There's gonna be Hell to pay when my union hears about this!" said Lopez.

"Damn straight!" chuckled Commack.

Steeler snorted. "Aren't you a little young for that kind of language, private?" He allowed a grin to come through on his gritty, worried face.

"In Chicago, we have something called profanity. Softies like you might faint if you heard it.

"That's where I figured how to handle a gun. In some alleyway, I was with a bunch of my buddies. Then some white trash showered us with these big bullets we use now. I killed one and they bugged out. Later I figured, I better be shootin' something that ain't human instead."

"Well, I came in to the Corps looking to be a medic or surgeon. Help some guy with his leg blown off. I got through half of specialist training, but then they started shipping guys out to the fronts, trying to keep back the Covenant. 'We need every man we've got, soldier' said my NCO. But, that was thirteen, fourteen years ago. No use. So here we are, with the Covenant chasing our tails round our own planet," said Steeler, changing expressions to a farther-off look.

"Stay sharp, people," mumbled Blackman. Steeler noticed his lack of enthusiasm, his drawling tone. Ever since the Flood had overtaken _In Amber Clad_ and wiped out most of the crew, Blackman was not himself. He was like a machine now: take in stimuli, give out orders. What Blackman used to be

Three years ago. Serpenti VI in the Serpenti system

"Come on, waste the freaks! Where's my BOF (Base Of Fire)? Private Dale, fire your weapon. This is a turkey shoot!"

"Three jackals, to the left. Nine o'clock, they're on our flank! Sir?" asked Cpl. Avery.

"Smoke'em!"

After the orange blood spurted from their veins like tears from your eyes, it quieted down.

"Stay sharp!" yelled Blackman. Steeler leaned over.

"Looks like the zone is clear, Joe. We're pretty close to our objective. See that camp over there? They told us to frag every alien in the place. Then blow it up. Or some crap like that."

"James, move your fire team up. Cover'em, people."

"Clear, sir."

"Everyone, go, go, go!" Blackman charged up close to the edge of the brush. He pulled out a grenade and yanked the pin. His eyebrows went up and down twice in three seconds. Then, he tossed it long into a grouping of squeaking grunts. The noise was like if you strangled twelve chickens, two dogs barked and a Howitzer fired a round. All at the same time. Thirteen more grenades followed. If you can imagine the first explosion times thirteen, you're good on what it sounded like. Then Blackman held up a fist, and punched the air.

The squad burst into the camp, guns blazing. Any leftover Covenant were caught up in a hail of bullets and fell to the ground shivering with them as if it were January in the Arctic.

"Get out of here. I'm throwing a grenade at that thing," said Blackman, green eyes wild, pointing to a blue, glowing plasma coil. The squad skittered off into the forest, and he tossed a grenade at some instrument panel near the generator. He ran helter-skelter out of the camp, leaped head first into the bushes and turned around in enough time to see the coil go critical and burn down the whole camp.

"Smokin'."

Steeler fondly remembered everyone in the squad had their face covered with soot after that episode.

The clopping of boots on alien metal woke him from his daydream. He leveled his rifle lazily down the hall and waited for some more shooting. Killing things wasn't the easiest or most enjoyable job. It was your attitude. That was how Steeler felt. He worried, almost, about Blackman, because he acted like there was no hope and that had a bad influence on other soldiers, and himself. He was almost caught by surprise when a stream of ODSs pounded down the hall and saluted as they passed him by. Each had the same reaction as they saluted

Keyes and saw the Arbiter. She explained to them the situation.
"Don't shoot him, yada yada yada" | "

"Relieve these men, people. They've fought for three days straight." Those were the words that meant the most to Blackman and his men. They flopped over a few times to get out of the way of each fire team that covered the doors, then dozed off.

"Johnson, Arbiter, look at this. They're stopping," Keyes said, viewing the forward display. The Forerunner ship nosed up, and then beams shot out from its feet. It turned slowly, burning a circle in the African savannah. The thing easily dwarfed the Covenant flagship. Somehow, it occurred to Keyes that the Covies on board had no idea what was going on or how to control it. Something circular lifted out of the trench, probably due to some tractor beam emitted from the Forerunner ship. It was skeletal and looked pretty dilapidated. Then, several specks, which were dropships, shot out of the Forerunner craft. They swooped down towards the structure, and landed on it.

"Alright. We're going out. Second, first squad, go back to your Pelican, get the Hell out there and see what they're doing. Stop them, if you can. Blackman, you and your men. You know what you're up against. Lieutenant Keating (who was the commander of the platoon), you are to take orders from Blackman. _Don't_ forget that," barked Keyes.

"Yes, ma'am," responded the El-tee, a little disgruntled by this request.

Blackman looked him over quickly and decided he was a rich prick from some fancy-ass college. Then he ordered out the men to the bay, and laced his sentences with very vile profanity, which I would, in retrospect, regret putting down on this page.

They chuckled or grunted humorously and did as they were told. Running into little opposition on the way, the Helljumpers mounted the Pelican and blasted towards the Covenant. There was no landing, because there was no even-grounded drop zone, so the two squads piled out with Blackman and his men in the lead " however reluctantly. They had had a MRE (Meal Ready to Eat) and slept that short while, but they were still tired and deadened.

Going through a promising looking hatch, Blackman realized the structure of the object. There were two main passageways about a hundred feet wide around the circumference, along with smaller ones, presumably for maintenance? Blackman heard grunts, barks and shrieks of jackals and brutes, and the fluttering noises of drones' wings. He explained to the Lieutenant. The men continued down the dark, creaking passage. At points, sunlight came through from ragged holes torn from the metal skin when it had been removed from the ground. Four pipes, maybe five feet in diameter, ran along the length of the passage. Blackman heard the noises turn to the whining of plasma weapons, crashing explosions, and screams of dismay.

As he came around the curving interior, and battle unfolded before him. Brutes, with lines of horrid burns over their body, desperately fired grenades and plasma at large, metal bird-things. They spouted

clean lines of red laser at the brutes. Then Lopez gasped at the charred bodies of drones and jackals, cut into different pieces by the lasers.

"Maybe we oughta blow those things up before we mess with the brutes. I don't want to end up like a Christmas turkey," he whispered, most definitely frightened.

So Blackman pointed at the things and the two squads easily blew them to pieces. Then the brutes turned and realized there was even more trouble. Blackman almost pitied them as their looks of pain turned to horror. They all died. It wasn't over yet, though. More of the bird-things streamed out of openings in the pipes. Their lasers sliced through the air and stabbed at the now-frightened men.

"What'chya'll stupids waitin' for? Blow'em away!" yelled Commack. He returned the ruby red greeting with some blasts from his shotgun. The lasers then began hitting the men. The black armor melted away and the men realized it was going to burn them if they didn't bug out. They fired wildly in the machines' direction and ran away. More beams filled the passageway, and sliced men anywhere they could hit. Very few exploded. They kept sending the horrifying rays at the men, who were absolutely terrified for themselves. They screamed in pain as lasers sliced them apart. Their insulator suits were no match for the concentrated beams. Blackman really hated it. He used to be cocky, with a let's-get-the-freaks attitude. Before seeing all the killing. So many people had died, for what? What reason did the Commander have to chase after the Covenant flagship? Why was it worth the entire crew of her ship? It was sickening: the Flood, leaping forward, mutilating the crewmen and women. Their blood curdling screams for mercy, the shrieks as the infectious pods spiked into their bodies. Then, this. The calm, buzzing lasers, chopping the men into different pieces that didn't make sense lying in a heap on the ground.

This wasn't killing, though; it was slaughter. It wasn't war; it was execution.

Planet by planet, Covenant had killed countless men, women and children. Little babies. They lay in their mother's arms, gazing towards the sky as the heat began to wash them over. The old people, who decided that, maybe, yes, it was their time.

Then, the brave boys who left their homes to fight the senseless enemy. They took their guns, knives, and grenades and shouted out in anger at the things that had murdered their families. They fought for revenge. They died, they thought for some good, but so many died, it was worthless.

The men and women. The people, they died by the millions for some alien god, for some alien jihad. What had humanity done to deserve this? Was there a god? Or was it just survival of the "fittest?" "Might makes right." They died because a frail, croaking freak believed that the Halos were to bring salvation to the entire Covenant â€" a Great Journey to holiness. But what was it, really? To kill every last one of them. It was almost laughable. A cruel joke for some higher being.

Blackman didn't feel like moving his legs. Tears streamed from his eyes as his body, not him, flexed and extended his legs muscles

because it was instinct to run away from danger, and save himself. His face was striped with grit and clean lines where salty tears cut through the dirt. He burst into the sunlight, and the few men who lived jumped or limped aboard the Pelican. Still, bursts of red followed after.

He screamed in anger. He flailed his weapon at the emotionless machines. He hated the war and what it had brought: the Covenant, death, pain. What did they want? Him? Would they take him and leave? What would satisfy their hunger? What would spare the scant amount of mankind left?

If nothing would " then he'd go out fighting, just so he could be called a hero by anybody who remembered him later on. He'd use every last bullet. He'd throw every last grenade. He'd use every last goddamn weapon he got his hands on before he died. He was going to get the last laugh. Let the Prophet stick his freaking Index in the slot, and he'd laugh in his grave as the entire Covenant, Flood, anything " were blown to Hell and beyond.

End
file.